

Public-private logics in China's real-name policy and social media governance

Abstract

Media regulation and policy in China is one of the stricter in the world. The government regulates online information and monitors public discourse through a censorship system. Particularly, China's ongoing real-name regulation policy is an intensification of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) strict management of online information and Chinese citizens. With this policy, the Chinese government appears aligned with social media companies to gain access to citizens' private information. In accordance with these policies, the Chinese government regularly conducts online content moderation actions, closing social accounts or deleting social media posts for reasons such as disinformation, national security, and illegal profit.

These online regulation actions are frequently criticized, particularly from a Western perspective, for interference in private life, private markets, and the public sphere. At the same time, the party-state's online regulation policies have been effective in reducing problems such as cybercrime and violence. A majority of Chinese people accept the government's policies and believe that the government should take the responsibility of managing order in the online environment.

The contrasting perspectives of the Chinese and Western public reflect divergent approaches to balancing public and private interests—particularly on issues like freedom of speech and privacy—as well as differing views on the roles of government and the market in mediating these interests. This public-private balance carries profound implications for governance, social interactions, and broader societal norms. Analysing internet policies through the lens of this dichotomy can thus provide a valuable framework for a contextualised assessment of internet policies in China and elsewhere.

Before assessing the Chinese real-name regulation, this study first explores how the concepts of public and private have been theoretically understood in Western and Chinese context and then analyses how these conceptual differences function as underlying logics shaping Chinese social media regulation. It is argued that, in the West, the public and private dichotomy is constituted as a dualism, whereby public and private interests, spheres, lives, spaces and information are conceived in antagonistic terms. In China, however, the same concepts

constitute duality, whereby the public and private are mutually constitutive. This framework is then applied to China's internet policies by addressing the question how individuals and the government are related.

By immersing Western readers in the Chinese view on these notions, this study aims to offer them a lens that allows a better "from within" perspective on Chinese internet policies. At the same time, it confronts the Chinese view with a Western perspective, offering an outside-in view. The dialectical juxtaposition of these different perspectives makes this a comparative exercise that confronts historical trajectories with the aim of fostering a critical understanding of the contemporary political economy of the internet in China.

In order to examine how the concepts of public and private operate within China's social media platform governance, China's real-name policy (实名制) is taken as the central empirical focus. Real-name policy requires users to provide personal identification in order to register for and access a large number of online services. This renders it a subject of particular interest in the context of the evolution of the concepts of public and private in China, in conjunction with the influence of the new socialist market economy on the following aspects: government and citizen relations; perspectives on the boundaries separating public and private spaces; and relations between private and public interests.